

## Philosophizing in Translation: Translation as a Philosophical Practice

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses an example of ‘Philosophy on the Way between Languages’ in which translation is explicitly used as part of the process of doing philosophy. It shows that, rather than feeling impoverished by being forced to use a foreign language, the multiplicity of languages available can be used to enrich our philosophizing.

**Key Words:** Translation, Implicit/Explicit, intricacy, explication, process

### Introduction

In this paper I present some personal reflections on the relation between doing philosophy and living in translation.<sup>2</sup> I usually say that I’m bi-lingual and tri-cultural. I’m Dutch, I grew up in The Netherlands and spent the last five years in the English speaking world, 3 years in England and 2 years in Canada.

Whether we like it or not, English is our *lingua franca*. (And isn’t it curious that we use a term from the previous *lingua franca* to say so?) For people who were not born in an English speaking environment this situation is a challenge. We can raise a number of critical questions, e.g. whether this not necessarily leads to inequality of access for some, namely for those who were not born in English speaking countries? Or, whether it lowers the bar for others, namely those who were born in the English-speaking world, and have therefore immediate and seemingly effortless access to so many original works and translations--thus missing out on a part of the struggle with texts and ideas? On the other hand, there are also positive aspects. To use myself as an example, I’m Dutch and the only foreign language I know well is English. Sometimes I regret not knowing French or German well enough, but this is the situation and I’ve learned to live with it. It is precisely because of the existence of English as a *lingua franca* that I got access to non-Dutch philosophers and decided to study philosophy, in Canada. It is because of the globalization of English that I am here today, in Madrid--while I don’t speak a word of Spanish, and yet, we are able to interact and exchange ideas. The existence of a *lingua franca* opens new worlds, but it comes at a price. E.g. in The Netherlands there is a lot of pressure on academics to teach and write in

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2 All footnotes are in my MA thesis “Translations of the Implicit, tracing how language works beyond Gendlin and Derrida” (ICS, Toronto (Canada) 2012) Available on request.

English (perhaps more so than here because Dutch doesn't have as many speakers as Spanish.) This often leads to the loss of the ability to express oneself at the same level of technical nuance in Dutch as one can in English. I discovered that I couldn't explain my research to Dutch family members simply because I don't have Dutch technical terms for what I need to say. On the other hand, because English is not my native language, I'm acutely aware of the fact that I miss certain opportunities to speak with greater precision, that I lack access to all the expressive power of the language. Sometimes I notice that I'm writing in a sort of lifeless jargon which is not plain wrong, it might in fact do a reasonably good job of conveying an idea, but it is not empowered, not spirited. I would like to work in Dutch but I don't have the terminology for doing so, and to get a wider hearing I 'need' to work in English anyways. So as a native speaker of a relatively small European language I'm drawn into the global *lingua franca* and as a result of that I'm not quite at home in either of my languages. As an exile in both I have to translate, and re-translate both myself and the texts I'm reading.

While we could ask a number of critical questions about the general situation, I would like to focus on ways in which the multilingual situation can be used in a positive manner to empower the philosopher. Being forced into a bilingual mode of operation, a philosopher who works in a 'foreign' language can fall back on the home language to bypass certain limitations of the *lingua franca*.

### **Implicit and explicit**

In my current research I work with two philosophers who help me think about the explicit and implicit components of meaning: Jacques Derrida and Eugene Gendlin. Derrida is well-known and I don't need to go into details about him here. Gendlin is an American philosopher and psychologist with an Austrian background. His psychological research led him to reflect philosophically on 'the implicit.' His philosophical work shows a sensitivity to questions which one might call 'European,' while his emphasis on 'situations, practice, action, feedback, transitions, and progressions' is very North American. I think that I find some commonalities, and also some major differences, between Gendlin's project and what Derrida does. The relevance for translation is that it almost can act as a test case for a description of the process of *explication*, the process of making a part of the implicit

meanings explicit. This process, a zigzagging between implicit and explicit, between the known and unknown, has some significant parallels with the process of translation.

I need to say a bit more about Gendlin. In his work he seeks to directly access lived experience and bring it to symbolization. The embodied experience is an open and felt intricacy, in opposition to the view of experience as a representation of a closed world, of which the main ingredient is primarily cognitive. Not that experience is not also cognitive, but that is not all there is to it. It is more complex, more nuanced, it is an “intricacy.” The intricate life-interactions, interactions between body and environment, are irreducible to static patterns. At every moment in the ‘responsive’ reality certain implicit elements can be brought ‘to the surface,’ can be made explicit. Obviously, once an implicit element is explicated, a new intricate configuration of explicit and implicit emerges, so the cycle can begin again. A key metaphor for this process of explication is ‘to carry thought forward.’ One of the real contributions of Gendlin is that he develops a very careful and precise way of letting the implicit emerge and analyzing how that happens. He develops techniques like ‘focusing’ and ‘thinking at the edge’ with which he shows how to, well, ‘think at the edge.’ This close reading of what happens at the edge of thinking is one fruitful area of overlap with Derrida. It is also in this area that I see the relevance of his project for thinking about and with and in translation. So, how does one ‘philosophize in translation?’

### **A double translation**

I propose a double translation. I want to illustrate that in a short discussion of two technical terms from Gendlin’s philosophy and the challenges I had in translation them into Dutch.

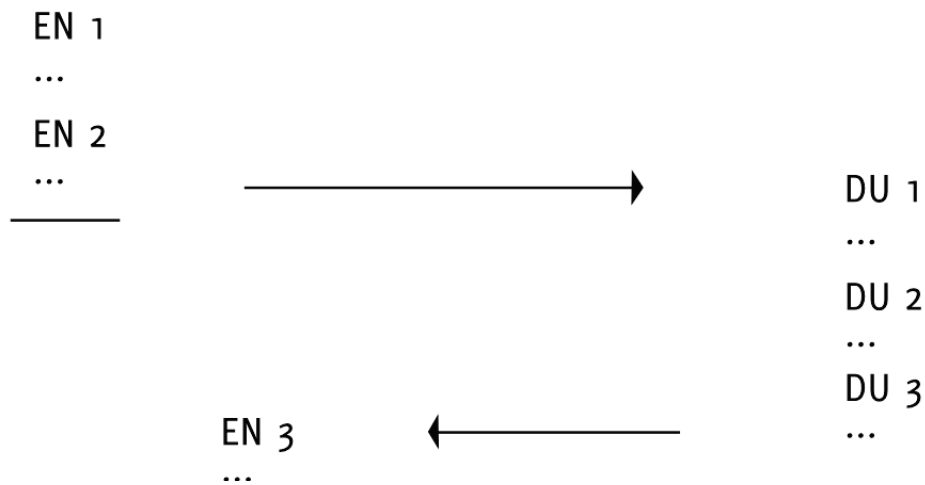
The first term is “intricacy.” Intricacy is for Gendlin the complex of experienced and symbolized meaning, the combination of what is explicitly put in words and that which we don’t know how to say yet, but about which we have a definite felt sense. E.g. the poet who is trying to find the right last line for the poem and who has to dismiss a number of suggestions which do not quite ‘fit,’ until the right words are found. At a certain point, while I was working on the definition of the term I noticed that I got stuck in jargon. At that point I decided to try a Dutch translation of the term “intricacy.” Soon I discovered that there is not one single term that I could use. One candidate is “ingewikkeld.” This word has the same root as “intricacy,” namely as ‘something being (en)folded.’ However, in

Dutch the word “ingewikkeld” has a strong connotation of something being complex at the rational level, as if it is primarily intellectually challenging. This is not the main concern of Gendlin, who uses the word more to indicate that what is intricate has a complex, interwoven, interactive structure. While I was thinking about the Dutch word “ingewikkeld” somehow it occurred to me that the opposite of the rational connotation, which I wanted to avoid, was not that “intricacy” is somehow irrational, but rather that it is “verrassend” and “speels.” (‘surprising’ and ‘playful.’) After this first step (the move from thinking in English to thinking in Dutch) I did a back-translation. Usually, a back-translation is a way to check whether the translation is correct, but that is not the intention here. Rather, what I try to do is to take what I found in Dutch and bring it home, give it a place in the English text I’m writing.

The second phrase is the metaphor “to carry forward.” I started with this English description: ‘the unfolding of what is implicit through a careful process of paying attention to it.’ I knew this was not quite the whole story, but I found it difficult to proceed with it in English. My initial Dutch translation included phrases like (I gloss) [bringing the situation forward], [progress, to improve], [increasing wisdom, insight.] All these suggestions seem to focus on a ‘quantitative’ idea of progress, while neglecting the intricacy of the situation. The next suggestion was “oog krijgen voor de complexiteit van de situatie” [to get a sense (eye) of the complexity of the situation] but I dismissed this one because it was not elegant, and it misses the movement aspect. The final Dutch translation suggestions include elements of [to unfold], [to bring to articulation], and [being in transit/on the move.] I consolidated this in the back-translation as “to carry forward means to move from an intricacy into articulation a part of that which was previously implicit.” I feel that I’m not there yet, but I can also see how the detour into Dutch and back again helped me move forward with this. I try to capture the movement in this picture.

## Explication in English

## Explication in Dutch



To recap: I use a two-step process in which I move thinking forward by detouring through my ‘other’ language, the language that I’m not using in my current writing. That this ‘other’ language happens to be my mother-tongue just shows how displaced and entangled I am. With the next step I seek to bring the discoveries home. I try to do a back-translation into English in order to enrich the ‘original’ text and to consolidate the gains made in the Dutch part of the process. From this point I can try to move forward <sup>3</sup>with the process. It goes without saying that this process can be repeated endlessly.

### Closing remarks

I want to finish this reflection with the question: “Why philosophize in translation?” I can think of at least three reasons.

[1] Languages differ, and differences open up creativity. It goes without saying that no translation is ever complete and full. In the game of give and take that is part translation we are presented with challenges, or rather, opportunities to engage creatively in and with language. Doing that is not without risks, because the playful surprises we encounter can leave us ‘lost for words.’ Going to another language in order to find our words again, is one way of using the creative potential at our disposal.

[2] There is also a pragmatic reason for working in translation: it can help us against getting stuck. We can get restricted to jargon when we write in a foreign language. Moving back and forth to our own language can help us break that cycle. We can also get stuck in a situation in which we know something (experientially, in a deep embodied sense) but in which we don't know yet how to articulate that. Working in translation can help us carry our thought forward, as the examples I shared show.

[3] Living and working in different languages pushes us out of our comfort zone. As I went through several transition cycles I certainly had the experience of profound discomfort and a sense of loss. But I decided that after I mourn about the loss I also want to utilize the disorientation. The point I want to make is that the zig-zagging between languages of the bilingual philosopher is not something to accidentally 'slip into,' not the inevitable consequence of living in translation, but rather a gift that we can employ deliberately.

By calling translation a Philosophical Practice I'm not only arguing for philosophers to be translators of the foreign language texts they work with. I'm encouraging bilingual philosophers, in particular those who work 'in exile,' to translate into their 'other' language, their mother tongue, perhaps?--and back again, and so carry their work forward. From Derrida's analysis we know that a 'gift' is not without surprises, not without danger even, but I think this one is worth the risk.